

# Master falconer Ed Schaub makes history with first peregrine falcon 'take' in three decades



A MILLENNIUM FALCON — Ed Schaub also is flying this adult male gyr/peregrine hybrid falcon. (Photo by Randy Montoya)

By John German

On Mother's Day Ed Schaub (6822) did something no one has done legally for 30 years: He reached into a peregrine falcon's cliff-side nest and adopted a four-day-old chick.

The American peregrine falcon had been on the US Endangered Species List since 1970. It was de-listed in 1999 when it became clear that the population had made an unprecedented comeback. (See "Harvesting thought to help species" in box at right.)

The tale of Ed's "take," the first ever of a recovered endangered species, has since been shared in Internet chat rooms frequented by falconers, and Ed, a master-class falconer, has written about it for the North American Falconry Association's *Annual Journal*.

What's more, Ed's story has all the thrills and plot twists of a summer action flick. He gets a tear in his eye, an honest-to-goodness tear, when he tells it.

## The quest begins

It all started when, shortly after the peregrine's de-listing, a few states began to consider allowing licensed falconers to harvest a controlled number of birds.

Ed was one of perhaps 50 qualified falconers who entered a lottery to receive one of three peregrine falcon "live take" permits the State of Arizona planned to award for the 2001 breeding season. He got word in February that he had drawn permit #1.

Falcon chicks often are harvested before they are 21 days old so they can "imprint" with a falconer just as they would with their mother. And because the peregrine typically hatch in May, Ed set out in a hurry to find several promising nests, called eyries, within Arizona's borders.

Peregrine falcons don't leave whitewash on the cliff faces below their eyries, so their nests are hard to spot. Ed and his wife Anne spent days under cliffs, binoculars at the ready, watching and listening for the telltale signs of peregrine breeding and nesting: loud screeches as falcons seek potential mates, spectacular courtship flights during which the female tests her suitor's genetic mettle by attacking him, and males flying in and out of hidden eyries to take their turns at baby-sitting the eggs.

They located five promising eyries scattered over the Arizona state map.

## Strikes one and two

By May 8 Ed had received his permit, overcome a harrowing harangue of bureaucratic high jinks, and received permission from a base commander to take a bird from his first-priority eyrie on a military post near Nogales.

He rappelled down the 90-degree-steep cliff face, peered expectantly into the 100-foot-high eyrie, and saw just one chick, called an eyas, looking out at him. A nest of multiple offspring was needed for Ed to harvest a chick.

Discouraged and with the clock ticking on the "take season," he and Anne drove 80 miles to his second-choice site in the Peloncillo Mountains on the Arizona/New Mexico border. They hiked to the cliff side, pulled out a GPS locator, and discovered they and the eyrie were 500 yards from the state line — on the New Mexico side.

## Harvesting thought to help species

Although some people intuitively object to the idea of taking into captivity the offspring of a species so recently categorized as endangered, biologists generally agree that harvesting allows for a greater total number of peregrines and allows captive falcons to live longer, says Ed Schaub.

In the wild only two chicks from a four-chick nest are likely to survive the first months of life. In a three-chick nest, all three often fledge. Chicks in captivity usually live to maturity, as well. So taking one chick from a four-chick nest improves the chances that four will survive where only two might otherwise have survived.

Also, falcons in captivity live a longer life than those in the wild. It was the breeding of these long-lived captive-held falcons that is directly responsible for the successful comeback of the peregrine population in the United States, Ed says.

Down but not out, they headed for the third-choice site, a remote cliff side in far-southeastern Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains. Because base camp was a long and grueling day's hike from the eyrie, Ed and Anne needed assistance. Ed's brother John and Ed's falconery apprentice Dave Biddinger arrived at base camp on May 12.

## A clear warning

Around midday May 13 the group reached the top of the cliff. Ed asked Anne to lie down and peer over the edge to locate the eyrie while he set up the rappelling equipment. That's when one mother delivered a clear message to another (Anne and Ed have three sons), there at the top of a 250-foot-high cliff on Mother's Day.

In the days following the hatch, the female falcon spends most of her time with her nestlings. The chances were small that she'd be out hunting when the group arrived — but not small enough.

All Anne could do when she saw the mother falcon diving, with her five-foot wing span and clenched talons, was drop her head and cover her face. Ed heard a crack, like a bat hitting a baseball. Both Anne and the falcon were stunned.

The mother falcon flew away. A trickle of red ran down Anne's face and blood matted her hair. She needed stitches, but the group was hours from a hospital. Anne wanted to press on.

With new respect for both mothers, Ed rappelled down the cliff side, reached into the eyrie, and gently pulled out four chicks. At the top he compared the four, checked their health, chose a female, and returned the other three to the nest ledge.

"I wish everyone could experience the primal connection of reaching into such a wild and sacred place," wrote Ed in a letter to a fellow falconer. "A person seldom gets to feel that much life all at once."

## Third time's a charm

Energized by the significance of what had just happened and with the downy nestling tucked safely into a padded low-jolt neck pack he designed specifically for the task, Ed turned the five-hour hike down the mountainside into a three-hour jog.

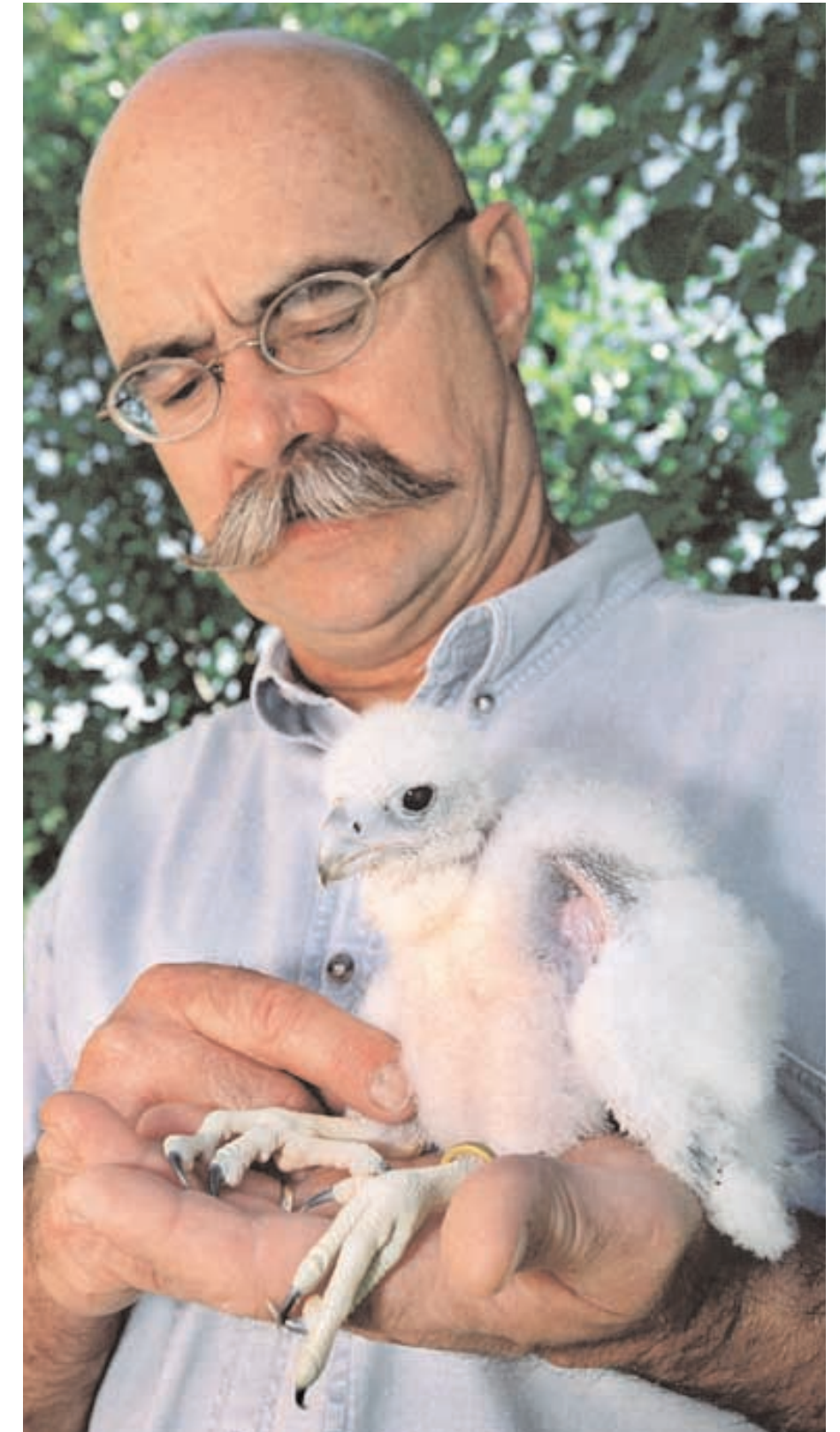
At base camp Ed became the chick's surrogate mother. He fed her raw meat, whistling to simulate the mother's screech that signals the chick to beg for food. She ate vigorously.

Apparently no other peregrine falcon was taken during the 2001 season. Bureaucratic hurdles may have gotten the best of the other two Arizona permit recipients.

Ed and Helen (the chick's name, after Helen Snyder, an Arizona biologist who helped Ed pull it off) are two of a kind.

Recently Ed successfully flew Helen for the first time. Some newly captive falcons simply fly away during their first free flight. Helen didn't.

"I get choked up when I think about the thrill of putting my hand into an eyrie used for thousands of years, the thrill of seeing nature at its very best, and the euphoria of first feeling that soft bird in your hand after years of dreaming and months of planning," says Ed. "It was a hell of an experience."



WILD CHILD — Master falconer Ed Schaub with two-week-old peregrine falcon Helen. (Photo by Randy Montoya)



HELEN at four days old, just after the "take."



THE CLIFF FACE in Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains where the nesting pair was first spotted in April. The arrow points to the location of Helen's eyrie.



IT'S WHAT'S FOR SUPPER — Ed feeds Helen raw meat with surgical forceps that simulates a mother's beak. (Photo by Randy Montoya)

\*Peregrine Falcon, "Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2001  
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